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The continence of virtue

Many writers in the virtue ethics tradition have followed Aristotle in arguing for a distinction between virtue and continence, where the latter is conceived as an inferior moral condition. In this paper I contend that rather than seeking to identify a sharp categorical difference between virtue and continence, we should see the contrast as rather one of degree, where virtue is a continence that has matured with practice and habit, becoming more stable, effective and self-aware.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtuous people are generally held to be those who always do the right thing for the right reason, and who never choose bad things in preference to good ones. But would a truly virtuous person never even be tempted to make bad choices? Does virtue properly so called consist in being entirely superior to temptation to do wrong or in feeling temptation but resisting it? An influential philosophical tradition stemming from the Greeks distinguishes between virtue proper (*arete*) and self-control or continence (*enkrateia*), where the former involves an harmonious alignment of the agent's reason and inclinations, and the latter a conflict between the two from which reason emerges the victor. While the continent person knows what is right but must face down the temptation to do wrong, the genuinely virtuous subject, according to Aristotle, attains a correct mean in passions and actions; he or she feels pleasure and pain 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (NE 1106b; 38).

Two questions immediately arise about this neat distinction between harmonious virtue and inharmonious continence. The first is whether it corresponds to the actual phenomenology of our moral experience, or whether the portrayal given of the virtuous agent represents an unrealistic and oversimplified ideal. Even if it should be conceded that pure virtue is rare in practice, is it correct in the first place to identify virtue with a kind of psychic harmony? The second question is whether it is right to assume, as many philosophers from Aristotle onwards have done, that, since harmony is better than disharmony, virtue is a superior state to continence and a higher target of moral

aspiration. The continent person is less perfect than the virtuous because her passions are not wholly aligned with what she recognises as right reason (*orthos logos*). Although Aristotle willingly accepts that continence is ‘to be included among things good and praiseworthy’ (NE 1145b; 160) (and presumably that the continent agent deserves high praise when she has a particularly hard struggle on her hands), virtue earns his greater respect on the ground that it is always better to have one’s inclinations and reason in full accord with one another.

However, this relative valuation of virtue and continence can seem problematic if it makes virtuous behaviour appear in some sense *easier* than continence. Whereas the continent person meritoriously fights the good fight against bad or inappropriate temptations, the ‘virtuous’ person who is ‘above’ temptation to act in a certain way might equally be said to be ‘below’ it, lacking the psychological constitution in which that vice is an option. On what Carol Gould has called ‘the labor theory of moral value’, it is the former rather than the latter who seems to have done something morally fine (Gould 1994; 175). Philippa Foot has claimed that ‘virtue is about things that are difficult for men’ (Foot 2002: 10); but if the virtuous person faces no struggle against temptation, it needs to be explained just what is difficult about virtue if the contention of virtue’s superiority to continence is to be sustained. Here the most promising answer, as we shall see, locates the difficulty in the process by which virtue is acquired. Virtue, once attained, may be immune to temptation but the challenge lies in achieving that state of psychic harmony in the first place.

One might, of course, reasonably wonder whether agents ever do achieve the complete psychic harmony which the Aristotelian tradition identifies with virtue. But even if they don’t (or only rarely do), it doesn’t follow that virtue so construed is inappropriate as an ideal to which we should approach as closely as we can. In any case, it is important not to misconstrue the nature of the psychic harmony at issue. This is first and foremost a *motivational* harmony, in which the agent’s reason and passions move her in the same direction. If the notion of untroubled virtue is still troubling, that may be because we are taking harmony to imply, in addition, a state of mental calm or serenity, but this may not always be present (whether or not Aristotle himself thought it would be, which is not wholly clear). A number of recent writers, including Karen Stohr, Susan Stark, Anne

Baxley and Jeffrey Seidman, have pointed out that where virtuous action has a cost, involving the sacrifice of some goods for the sake of others, the virtuous agent ought not to be indifferent to this cost, and should feel sorrow at the loss of goods incurred (see Stohr 2003, Stark 2001, Baxley 2007, Seidman 2005). Virtuous agents, therefore, should not always feel serene, even if they are in no doubt about how they should act and lack the inclination to act in any different way. Nevertheless, the expulsion of serenity from the account of virtue, as we shall see in due course, makes it harder to maintain a categorical distinction between virtue and continence.

In this essay I shall be concerned with aspects of both the phenomenological and the moral question about the nature of virtue and its putative distinction from continence. I shall treat these, so far as possible, together, since I believe that accounts of the ethical status of virtue and continence need to be psychologically realistic, suited for men rather than gods and conforming to the actual interplay of reason and emotion in our make-up. Not wholly originally, I shall argue that the difference between virtue and continence is rather one of degree than of kind; but I shall set out some reasons for thinking of virtue as a form of continence that has matured with practice; and I shall try to characterise the nature of that practice by some detailed reflections on the kind of labour required in the maturation process. Thus I shall also be articulating and defending a version of the 'labour theory of value'. As I do not think that virtue is a categorically different state of character to continence, I reject the view that the former is a categorically superior state of character to the latter; but I allow that a more developed, reflective and secure form of continence is more praiseworthy than one that is less mature and stabilised. In sum, I shall be arguing that virtue is not a condition distinct from continence but a highly developed form of continence, estimable in itself and meritoriously achieved.

2. 'VIRTUE IS ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE DIFFICULT FOR MEN'

Foot's remark that 'virtue is about things that are difficult for men' (Foot 2002: 10) warns us against any construal that collapses virtue into mere insensibility to temptation. There are, to be sure, certain bad temptations to which we might reasonably expect that virtuous agents would always be insensible, e.g. to commit acts of gross cruelty to children or animals; but while we might praise their character in general, we would not ascribe them

any particular virtue for not being cruel to helpless creatures (whereas we would certainly accuse of egregious vice anyone who *did* commit such cruelty). But where an agent is indifferent to things which it is legitimate to value or desire, giving them up would scarcely merit praise for virtue even where this is demanded by right reason. In Christine Korsgaard's words, 'the important thing is not that the passions be weak, but that they be directed to the same objects as rational principles' (Korsgaard 2008: 157). If, for instance, a person decided that he ought to risk his life in order to secure some greater good, we would not think of him as being notably virtuous if he were so tired of his life that he cared nothing about losing it. (Indeed, we might be highly critical of his insouciance.) On the Aristotelian account, the virtuously courageous person is not one who places no value on his life but rather one who, though valuing it as he should, isn't tempted to try to save it where reason persuades him there is some more important end to be served. In contrast, the continently courageous person in the same situation lacks equanimity and has to fight to control his urgent desire to run away; though reason takes the palm, equanimity is absent.

While both the virtuous and the continent agent, on this story, have a proper sense of the value of their lives, it might seem as if the continent agent, because he has the harder task to perform, deserves the greater praise for staying put. Foot poses the question: 'Who shows most courage, the one who wants to run away but does not, or the one who does not even want to run away? (Foot 2002: 10). If we read this as asking who is the more impressively courageous, then it looks as though the decision should go in favour of the continently courageous man, if *difficulty* is what counts most. But in that case, then, *contra* Aristotle, it seems that continence is a superior condition to virtue, and a finer target of aspiration. Since, *ex hypothesi*, the virtuous agent doesn't need to struggle against temptation but possesses inclinations which line up with his reason, everything ought to be plain sailing once he has determined his rational priorities. But for the continently courageous person, things are anything but plain sailing. If both successfully bring their craft to shore, the continent agent does so through decidedly choppiest waters.

And yet (to continue the metaphor) who would choose to navigate through troubled seas if she could alternatively do so through calm ones? The continent agent merits praise for acting according to right reason when her passions move her in some different

direction, but the misdirection of her passions is itself a form of imperfection. In the virtuous person, says Aristotle, appetite and reason ‘speak with the same voice’ (NE 1102b; 26). Aristotle is in no doubt that it is better to be virtuous rather than continent, not so much because the former necessitates less struggle than the latter but because it is essentially *finer*. Plain sailing may be more convenient than sailing through a squall, but Aristotle’s more significant claim goes beyond this: the elimination of (inner) squalls and the occasions of squalls is a condition devoutly to be wished because it marks an intrinsically finer character. Virtuous people are not merely at peace rather than in conflict with themselves but are self-consciously committed to the good or noble (*to kalon*). Thus ‘it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs’ (NE 1115b; 66), and, more generally, ‘A man is noble because he possesses those good things that are fine for their own sake and because he is a doer of fine deeds even for their own sake; and the fine things are the virtues and the actions that arise from virtue’ (EE VIII.iii.6-7; 471/3).

Inspired and motivated by a love of *to kalon*, the Aristotelian virtuous agent has no inclination to choose anything which fails to meet the standards set by her practical reason (*phronesis*); for nothing which so fails will be fine. She chooses good things because they are good, and she does so spontaneously, without struggle. But how, then, can her virtue be concerned with ‘the things that are difficult for men’? The answer to this, for Aristotle, is that it is the *acquisition* of virtue that is difficult, rather than the performance of virtuous deeds once one has attained a fine character. In the remainder of this essay, I shall broadly defend Aristotle’s account of moral development while arguing that certain aspects require amendment. In stressing the effort needed for moral development, Aristotle rightly locates, I believe, a major source of difficulty of virtue; for character refinement is something that needs to be worked on, and the labour can be hard. It is plausible, too, to see the moral aspirant’s progress as a systematic process of enkratic effort, aimed at bringing about in time a closer alignment of inclinations and reason – though I shall suggest that not all continent agents are engaged in such a self-improving enterprise. Unlike Aristotle, however, I shall argue that the labour involved in moral development is never finished, and that we should neither seek, nor expect, to be able in the end to do without continence. While we might reasonably refer to a mature

continence as ‘virtue’, we can continue to locate part of the value of such virtue in the effort needed to nourish and sustain it.

3. HOW TO BECOME VIRTUOUS

On Aristotle’s account, the virtuous person is not born virtuous (which would make the possession of virtue a matter of moral luck) but becomes so by intentionally practising the kind of acts which would flow from the accomplished virtue. Moral virtue, says Aristotle, ‘comes about as a result of habit’; hence its development ‘requires experience and time’ (NE 1103a; 28). Because virtues are to do with ‘passions and actions’, in each of which there can be excess and defect, the object of this self-training is to hone our passions so that they strike the appropriate mean between these extremes, and consequently spur actions which do likewise (NE. 1106b; 38). In regard, for instance, to feelings of fear and confidence, the virtuously courageous person will have them in a degree that is rationally appropriate to the circumstances, neither too much nor too little; and in general a virtuous person will have feelings ‘at the right time, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way,’ this being what is ‘both intermediate and best’ (ibid.). 1

This disciplining of the emotions or passions is possible because emotions, as Aristotle recognised and many contemporary writers have stressed, are ‘cognitive-laden capacities’ (in Nancy Sherman’s phrase) which can be made to listen to reason and submit to its authority; ideally, contrary-to-reason emotions will eventually disappear from the scene. ‘We stand well with regard to the emotions,’ says Sherman, ‘... when emotions are transformed in this deep manner and not merely suppressed or controlled’ (Sherman 1997: 38). Retaining only the emotions that reason approves, virtuous people, according to David Carr, ‘are those who are no longer in the least inclined to certain squalid or dishonourable courses of action’ (Carr 2009: 43). However, to avoid representing the standard virtuous agent in the guise of a reformed character who has rid himself of his vicious tendencies, we should add, more positively, that virtuous agents are disposed towards fine and honourable courses of action. According to Aristotle, a sure sign that an agent has acquired genuine virtue is that he takes pleasure in doing virtuous

acts on account of their fineness (a pleasure that should not be confused with that which an enkratic person may take in his ability to resist importunate desires) (NE 1104b; 32-3).

To acquire virtue, says Aristotle, we need to imitate and practise the kinds of acts (e.g. temperate, just or brave ones) that the genuinely virtuous (temperate, just or brave) agent performs as a matter of course; fundamentally, we learn to do by doing (NE 1103a-b; 28-9). To be sure, some fortunate individuals have a head-start in this process, being gifted with 'natural virtue', explained as an innate, spontaneous disposition to act temperately, justly, courageously, and so forth. But this, he insists, should not be confused with true virtue because it is not yet guided by right reason, and its lack of intelligent guidance can sometimes cause it to do more harm than good, as when the naturally bold person foolishly exposes himself to danger (NE 1144b; 156-7). Genuine *ethike arete* is the product of a training programme which is guided by the agent's own practical wisdom, possibly supplemented by that of competent moral mentors. Mere habituation without the guidance of reason would be insufficient to induce true virtue either in the naturally virtuous or in any others; as Korsgaard points out, habit alone cannot transform passions into perceptions of the good (Korsgaard 2008: 202n.25).

This account prompts the interesting question of how much seemingly virtuous behaviour should be ascribed to fully-fledged virtuous agents and how much to moral novices, trainees who have not yet fully succeeded in bringing their passions into harmony with their reason. Although the temperate, just or brave acts of the latter superficially resemble those that truly virtuous persons perform, they are not yet virtuous acts in the sense of being the acts of truly virtuous agents. Given that the process of acquiring virtue, as Aristotle describes it, takes time and effort, much apparently virtuous behaviour must be supposed the work of moral apprentices rather than finished virtuous agents. How far a person has got in the process may not always be evident from her overt behaviour, since the actions of a person of strong self-control may be indistinguishable from those of one whose passions are more thoroughly aligned with reason. And while Aristotle claims that it is *virtuous* agents who take pleasure in the fineness of their actions, aspiring continent agents can be expected to do so as well, in so far as they successfully overcome their wayward passions.

For Aristotle, the virtue-building process amounts to a systematic programme of *enkraitic* effort designed to develop good habits. So would it be correct to suppose that every continent agent, or every agent who occasionally displays continence, is a virtue-novice, engaged in a self-conscious programme of character enhancement? This by no means follows. It is important to distinguish the proto-virtuous agent from the ‘merely’ self-controlled one. The difference is that the former is aspirational in a way that the latter is not. Some continent agents are content to remain at the level of basic continence, tackling their bad desires when they appear but lacking the long-term aim of rising superior to them. While some continent people may become very good at grappling with bad temptations on a piecemeal basis, the proto-virtuous person aims for a psychic realignment in which the dissonance between her feelings and her reason is adjusted more systematically. Proto-virtuous agents couple the practice of continence with a systematic attempt to love the good. For them it is not enough simply to follow the right rule; they want not only to act well but to *like* acting in that way. 2

To see the difference between the two varieties of continence, consider the cases of Jim and Jack. One Sunday morning Jim is lying in bed, looking forward to a lazy day, when he suddenly recalls that he had promised to drive his elderly mother that morning to visit her best friend in hospital. Jim is sorely tempted to pretend to have forgotten the engagement and to remain in his warm and comfortable bed. But he makes the requisite effort to resist that temptation, recognising that he has good reason to act in a way discordant with his inclination. While Jim clearly acts commendably, if there is no more to his story than this there is no ground for ascribing to him more than a simple continence. But now consider Jim’s neighbour Jack, who is similarly enjoying a Sunday-morning lie-in when he remembers that he has promised to take *his* mother on a hospital visit. Jack is no keener than Jim on the prospect of getting out of bed, but, like Jim, he recognises the force of the reason for doing so and acts on it. Suppose, however, that Jack doesn’t merely want to act rightly on this occasion; more far-sighted and morally ambitious than Jim, he wishes to become the sort of person who performs right actions spontaneously, without needing to struggle with conflicting inclinations. ‘Failing to do the right thing this time,’ reflects Jack, ‘wouldn’t only be wrong in itself; it would do nothing to help me develop good habits. To let my mother down today isn’t the action of

someone who wishes to become better and to take a genuine pleasure in acting well for its own sake.’

Jack’s case illustrates a significant aspect of the Aristotelian story, the aspiration of the budding virtuous agent to develop a deep and powerfully motivating *love of the good*. As M.F. Burnyeat observes, the Aristotelian ‘learner in morals’ is ‘someone who is tending towards a firmly established state of character which includes, and therefore must in part have developed out of, convictions about what is noble and just’ (Burnyeat 1980: 74). Crucially, he aims not just to *know* what is good but to have a positive emotional attitude towards it; in Aristotle’s words, ‘the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy and noble hatred’ (NE1179b; 270). Commenting on Aristotle’s claim that good acts are done for the sake of the noble, Korsgaard remarks that, for Aristotle, ‘a good action is one whose agent sees it as the embodiment of right reason’ and who does it because it possesses that feature (Korsgaard 2008: 191).

It might be pointed out here that Jim too does what he does because he ‘sees it as the embodiment of right reason’; or at least, he sees it as rationally required (as conforming to *orthos logos*). Yet there is still a large difference between Jim and Jack. Jim views the rightness of what he is doing as a reason for overcoming his inclination to stay in bed but he lacks Jack’s ambition to develop a love of the good. He has, so to speak, a thinner conception of what is good about good. To be more precise, he is able to recognise good when he sees it, but he lacks Jack’s sense of the attractiveness, the fineness, of the good. Even if he has some inkling of why such a sense might be worth developing, he lacks the moral ambition, or the energy, to develop it; ‘I’m quite content to remain as I am,’ he might say; ‘I’ve no wish to be a saint. If I can usually keep my moral hands clean, that’s good enough for me.’

Jim’s case differs also from that of an agent who strives hard after virtue but fails to make much progress in self-improvement. The would-be-virtuous agent applies practical wisdom in order to bring her passions and actions into conformity with right reason, but agents whose passions are too strong or their reason too weak may fall well short of their goals. Yet total failure to advance is likely to be rare where agents take the Aristotelian advice to develop good habits. The old saw that ‘practice makes perfect’ may be over-optimistic, but there will be very little perfection without practice. We gain the virtues,

says Aristotle, ‘by first exercising them (as also happens in the case of the arts)’. Being by nature adapted to receive them, ‘we are made perfect by habit’ (NE 1103a; 28). But he also adds a caution: bad qualities as well as good ones can be acquired through habit: ‘some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in the one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances’. It therefore makes ‘*all* the difference’ what habits we aim to acquire. Although man is a rational animal, Aristotle knows how difficult it can be for reason to take charge when bad habits have become embedded (NE 1103b; 29).

I referred earlier to the ‘labour theory of value’ which locates the value of moral action in the (amount of) labour or effort needed to perform it. To do good where doing good is easy is, on this theory, less estimable than doing good where it is hard. However, not just any action that is a) difficult-but-practicable for an agent and b) conforms to right reason is praiseworthy on a plausible version of the labour theory. Suppose, for instance, that one tackles something that meets these two conditions but does so simply because one enjoys a challenge, or because one finds such activity pleasurable without regard to the moral case for doing it. While one would not be doing anything wrong (since the action is consistent with *orthos logos*), the difficulty encountered is not of the right kind to earn one *moral* credit. For example, a man who cycles a hundred miles in a sponsored charity race, but does so to because he enjoys cycle races and not because he cares anything for the charity, cannot be praised for making an effort on its behalf. 3

A plausible form of the labour theory of moral value should therefore focus on the motivational difficulties that agents encounter once they recognise what they morally ought to do. It is the difficulties they intentionally tackle in doing the right thing because it *is* the right thing that earns agents moral praise. 4 The struggles with wayward inclinations which continent agents overcome (and incontinent agents fail to) evidently fall under this description. But there is a second, and highly important, variety of meritorious labour identified by the Aristotelian account of moral development – namely, that which is involved in the process of developing good moral habits by practice. When Jim and Jack make the effort to overcome the temptation to stay in their cosy beds, they apply their will to following what reason tells them is the right course of action. To succeed, they both need to face down the contrary motivation to procure their own selfish

pleasure. But Jack is also engaged in a further onerous task. Not content to tackle bad temptations piecemeal, he is working to become a person for whom such temptations have progressively less force. To this end, he seeks to develop good habits and avoid, or eliminate, bad ones. As time goes by, if he keeps up the effort, he can expect to have less trouble than he presently does in combating individual bad temptations. But that doesn't mean that he will deserve less praise than for acting well. The labour theory is well able to cope with his case and give credit where credit is due. We might label as *occasional labour* the work done by the 'merely continent' agent (such as Jim) who has to struggle anew each time a bad temptation arises. Jack, by contrast, has performed the *developmental labour* required to make him into the kind of person for whom such occasional labour is needed less and less. In the end, Jack's good behaviour may be habitual and spontaneous but it has still cost him effort, and is creditworthy on that score.

In one respect, the picture given in the preceding paragraphs is over-simplified. In practice, continent agents do not fall into two sharply distinguishable categories, the 'merely continent' and the 'proto-virtuous'; there is a spectrum of cases ranging between the extremes and people vary in their degree of moral ambition as well as in the point of development they reach. Those who are notably successful in this project are most fittingly labelled 'virtuous'. But, as I hope to show, their virtue differs in degree rather than in kind from the continence of the proto-virtuous person. They are not a different and superior species of moral agent but people who are further on in the process of character enhancement; and I shall also argue that to remain where they are and not risk reversal, they need to keep up the good work.

It is also likely that many of the people I have described as 'merely continent' will come at some point to frame larger moral ambitions. This could happen where it occurs to them that by expending more preparatory labour on self-improvement in the present, they can save themselves much occasional labour in the future; by striving to bring their inclinations more closely in line with their reason, they make an investment in self which will pay dividends in the long run. Admittedly, this might seem to be rather a self-interested or prudential motivation for self-improvement (and indeed one may wonder whether it is genuine *moral* self-improvement where the leading incentive is to reduce one's own trouble). But it is probable too that many 'merely continent' agents – who are,

after all, fully competent rational agents – will, in reflecting on the reasons for making certain choices, be struck by the thought that it is good to be the sort of person from whom such choices flow spontaneously, rather than after a struggle. Even Jim may eventually become more like Jack, if he sees that where it is fitting to do something, it is also fitting to like doing it because it is fitting. And from wanting to like doing the good to wanting to be someone who likes doing it is a relatively short step.

4. VALUING VIRTUE AND CONTINENCE

We are now in a better position to address Foot's question about the relative value of virtue and continence (which, in a terminological departure from Aristotle, she casts as a problem about deciding which is the higher kind of *virtue*). Foot candidly allows that many people 'feel strongly inclined to say that it is for moral effort that moral praise is to be bestowed, and that in proportion as a man finds it easy to be virtuous so much the less is he to be morally admired for his good actions' (2002: 11). But this intuition, she thinks, is opposed by another. For while it appears that 'great virtue [i.e. continence] is needed where it is particularly hard to act virtuously' – that is, when sharp and insistent temptations assail us – 'yet on the other hand it could be argued that difficulty in acting virtuously shows that the agent is imperfect in virtue' (2002: 10). On Foot's reading of the moral phenomenology, we have inconsistent intuitions about whether to praise more highly the self-controlled agent who refuses to give in to temptation or the agent whose character lacks the flaw which, in the former, allows temptation to arise.

Wishing to uphold the Aristotelian claim that the latter agent is morally superior to the former, Foot sees the task as one of explaining how the virtuous agent can still be described, despite his inner harmony, as dealing with something that is 'difficult' for human beings. A virtuous man, she suggests, would feel no temptation to steal from a shop while the shopkeeper's back was turned; in the same circumstances a merely continent agent might face a struggle against temptation. It is clear that the continent agent, if he acts rightly, does something hard; but what difficult thing does the virtuous agent accomplish? 5 Foot's suggestion is that while a virtuous non-thief would feel no temptation to steal, he could still be praised for his (Aristotelian) virtue if the circumstances were objectively tempting ones (say, if he were a poor man and the goods

at stake were things that he needed) (2002: 11). The general formula suggested by this example is that an agent displays laudable virtue where, although she is not actually *tempted* to act wrongly, the circumstances are ones that are potentially *tempting* to someone in her position (and where a ‘merely continent’ agent could be expected to have a struggle on her hands). A rich man in the same setting might also feel no temptation to steal, though for him, as the situation is less objectively tempting, a similar ascription of virtue would be inappropriate (2002: 11).

I agree with Karen Stohr that this analysis is flawed. The fact that the rich man lacks the poor man’s need for the goods may not be the only reason why he isn’t tempted to steal: he may also be the kind of person who never would steal, and in that respect be quite as ‘virtuous’ as the poor man. As Stohr remarks, ‘the extent of his honesty comes out only counterfactually’: if his circumstances were different (say, he lost all his money in a stock-market crash) and he still didn’t feel tempted to steal, then it would be clear that his honesty was a part of his character (Stohr 2003: 347). Stohr proposes a variant analysis, which she thinks Foot might accept, namely that in the situation envisaged the poor man, unlike the rich man, ‘has an opportunity to let his virtue shine forth. His mettle is tested in a way that the rich man’s is not, and this is the reason why we say that in acting honestly here, he shows more virtue than the rich man does’ (2003: 347). But while Foot might well agree with this, it does not give her all she wants. That one person may be better placed than another to display a particular quality doesn’t prove that he has more of it than the other does. For all the circumstances show, the rich man may actually be of stouter integrity than the poor man. The phrasing ‘shows more virtue’ is ambiguous between ‘shows virtue more fully’ and ‘shows a fuller virtue’ and there is no valid inference from the former to the latter. It is true that we have more direct evidence of the poor man’s honesty here than we do of the rich man’s. But we have no evidence for concluding that the poor man is more honest than the rich one. If we read Foot, as modified by Stohr, as locating the sense of the expression ‘X is honest’ by reference to the scope for X to display honesty, then we are in danger of conflating ‘is honest’ with ‘*seems* honest’. In any case, in speaking of the testing of the poor man’s mettle, Stohr would seem to be talking of continence rather than virtue, since to be on one’s mettle is to be disposed to do one’s best, and mettle is tested where there are reasons to be faced

down for doing otherwise. If this is what the poor man is doing here, then what he displays more clearly than the rich man is an admirable *continence*.

Foot's attempt to explain the difficulty she thinks must be associated with virtue in terms of the objective temptingness of circumstances is unsatisfactory; but there is a simpler way of accommodating what she terms our 'intuition' that the virtues are about 'what is difficult for men'. On Aristotle's view that no one is born virtuous but becomes so by deliberately forming good habits, the virtuous person has already done the hard work in that preparatory stage. While no further 'occasional labour' may be needed when tempting circumstances arise, things are easy now for the virtuous agent only because they were hard to begin with when, inspired by moral ambition, he sought to bring his inclinations into full accord with his reason. He has fought the good fight and won; and that struggle over, no further struggle is required.

As we shall see, there are reasons to doubt whether for non-godlike humans (which is to say, for all of us) the struggle ever is completely over. Virtue does not emerge from the practice of continence like a butterfly from its chrysalis, fully mature and perfect. Indeed, Aristotle himself conceded that human beings rarely if ever attain 'a heroic and divine kind of virtue' – by which he presumably meant a state of harmony between reason and inclination so entire and stable that nothing could ever disturb it (NE 1145a; 159). By investing labour in the task of bridging the gap between her inclinations and her reason, a person pursuing self-improvement should find it progressively easier to deal with temptation. But no matter how effortless that dealing comes to seem, she will still need to keep herself in shape by maintaining good habits; she must also beware the illusion of thinking that now she has made the grade, she can never again fall below it.

Aristotle's account of how we develop the virtues begins rather sparsely. Being 'adapted by nature' to receive the virtues, he says, we 'are made perfect by habit'; and habits are acquired by performing repeatedly the appropriate acts: thus we become just by doing just acts and brave by doing brave ones (NE 1103a-b; 28-9). But habit can also make us worse instead of better: thus we become unjust by regularly doing unjust things, and 'self-indulgent and irascible' by acting self-indulgently and irascibly (NE 1103b; 29). So far this seems a rather mechanistic account of the development of both virtue and vice; but Aristotle goes on to explain that there is more to becoming virtuous than merely

engaging in repetitive action (behaviour that could be quite mindless and unreflective if we were simply doing what came naturally). It is crucial that we also *think* about what we are doing and perform, for example, just and temperate acts ‘*as* just and temperate men do them’, deliberately choosing them because we believe they are worthy in themselves (NE 1105b; 35).

If we were gods, that would be the end of the story, since we would have no inclination to choose any but the worthiest things; but for humans, Aristotle recognises, it is different, since our passions often move us to choose what reason rejects. Hence the process of moral development must involve the agent’s practising a systematic self-control, with the self-conscious aim of forming the habits that will bring about the closer alignment of reason and inclination. That the formation of good habits *will* result in such convergence is, perhaps, a conclusion that Aristotle takes for granted rather than demonstrates (while good habits should make one more efficient at dealing with temptation, it is not quite clear why they should make temptation come to seem less tempting). But Aristotle’s account does at least clearly show that moral development is an onerous process, requiring dedicated self-conscious effort by the aspirant.

5. VIRTUE AND WHAT WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT

Here it is worth saying something briefly about one well-known attempt to clarify the Aristotelian notion of the virtuous agent and the distinction between virtue and continence. Impressed by the psychological implausibility of supposing that virtuous agents are those who have moved entirely beyond temptation, John McDowell has suggested that we should see the virtuous person as immune to bad temptation in the sense that while she continues to feel the attraction of certain things which formerly attracted her, she no longer sees any reason whatever for giving in to them. She is immune to bad temptations in so far as she has ceased to regard them as supplying even *prima facie* reasons for action. The genuinely virtuous agent does not balance reasons for action in the way the merely continent agent does, but sees some aspect of a situation as ‘constituting a reason for acting in some way’ that puts all other reasons out of court; ‘this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation (the

present danger, say), but as *silencing* them' (McDowell 1998b: 55-6; my emphasis). Elsewhere, McDowell glosses the notion of 'silencing' by remarking that where one reason for action silences others, 'it [brings] it about that, in the circumstances, they are not reasons at all' (McDowell 1998a: 17).

McDowell's theory of virtue has been extensively discussed in the literature and there is no need here to spend very long in this well-trodden territory. But a few observations are in order, since the theory purports to show that there is a genuine categorical difference between virtue and continence – the thesis I am disputing in this paper. Many critics have noted that McDowell's notion of 'silencing' is not at all clearly defined. When he writes that a silencing reason causes the reasons it silences to be 'in the circumstances, ... not reasons at all', does he mean that they cease to have any rational force whatever in those circumstances, or that, while retaining that force (or some of it), they are not, for the nonce, reasons to which the agent should pay any attention? As Anne Margaret Baxley notes, McDowell occasionally hints at the second alternative (which she labels 'normative silencing') but more often seems to prefer the first ('objective silencing') (Baxley 2007: 405). Yet the first alternative is scarcely compatible with his own concession that the virtuous agent continues to feel the attractiveness of certain courses even though she judges them ineligible; for it is hard to grasp how something can be genuinely attractive (an object of desire) without affording at least a *prima facie* reason for action (action, that is, to satisfy the desire). The second alternative therefore looks more psychologically realistic, but to adopt it makes it considerably harder to draw a categorical distinction between virtue and 'mere' continence. For the agent that McDowell would label 'continent' sees just as clearly as the 'virtuous' agent does that the *prima facie* reason provided by the object of temptation is one that should be rejected in the circumstances; and, like the 'virtuous' agent, she rejects it. And although McDowell claims that in the 'continent' agent's case that *prima facie* reason is merely 'overridden' by other reasons rather than 'silenced' altogether, it is hard to give any operational content to this distinction so long as he allows that the 'virtuous' agent is not wholly insensible to temptation. 6

Also open to objection is McDowell's claim that the virtuous agent typically displays a 'serenity' which is foreign to the agent who is simply continent. According to

McDowell, a truly courageous agent who is faced with mortal danger, although he correctly appraises the risk and has no relish for the thought of death, still feels no inner struggle when he stands fast before the danger (hereby being quite different from the merely continent man, who may be sorely tempted to ‘chicken’) (McDowell 1998c: 92). McDowell candidly allows that there is ‘a high degree of idealization’ in this picture, and that in practice virtue is usually ‘to some degree tainted with continence’ (ibid.).⁷ Yet would we really admire such virtue as he describes, even if we did encounter it? As noted earlier, several recent writers have rightly challenged the idea that ideal virtue should be serene. Consider a person who thinks it better to die nobly in defence of his country than to flee in order to preserve his life. One would expect him to have weighed up the rival arguments in favour of standing fast and of retreating before deciding in favour of the former. If, instead, he considered that there was *nothing at all to be said* in favour of the option of retreat, he would strike us as practically irrational or as having a strange and perverse lack of interest in his own survival. As Stohr justly notes, there is ‘nothing shameful about feeling pain at the sacrifice of something that is truly *kalon*’ – and life is *kalon* because of the variety of goods that are only available to the quick, not the dead (Stohr 2003: 354). When a mother gives up her life in order to save her child, Stohr points out, she is unlikely to think ‘My life means nothing here’; rather, she will regard her life as worth sacrificing in the circumstances (ibid: 358). As Jeffrey Seidman succinctly reminds us, ‘the lesser of two losses is still a loss’ (Seidman 2005: 73), and it ought to be felt as such.

If ‘silencing’ means disregarding considerations which ought to matter to us, then it is implausible to posit it as the distinguishing mark of virtuous action. One might, of course, reject a consideration as a reason for action while retaining an emotional attitude to it. Susan Stark reminds us that while a virtuous person who believes she should show courage in a certain situation may reject the reasons for running away, she may still (without detriment to her virtue) feel the emotional pain associated with the prospect of losing her life. Furthermore, ‘[a] consideration can be evaluative without having any say whatsoever in action: its evaluative-ness can be fully expressed in the emotional state of the agent’ (Stark 2001: 452). But if that emotional state should be one of serene unconcern, then the evaluative-ness of the consideration fails to find any expression *at*

all. This is a normatively unsatisfactory state, because a rational agent ought to have a lively sense of the value of her life, even where she believes she should put it at risk for the sake of some greater good.

6. THE NEED FOR STAYING POWER

I have suggested that the intuition that virtue is ‘about things that are difficult for men’ can be captured by referring to the ‘developmental labour’ that is required from the agent who seeks to improve her moral character. Even an agent who is well endowed with ‘natural virtue’ will need to practise doing good acts *as* good men do them, making an effort to love doing them for their own sake. On the Aristotelian account, developing virtue requires training not just in action but in feeling; the moral apprentice strives not only to act as her reason tells her she ought but to *want* to act in that way. This may be a very arduous process if the agent’s reason and her inclinations initially pull her in sharply different directions. Aristotle believes that practising continent action until it becomes habitual is the way to redirect wayward passions and bring them into line with reason, and self-improving individuals aspire not just to do but to love the good. But since emotions are ‘cognitive-leaden capacities’ (Sherman) that can be made to listen to reason, reason can also be envisaged as acting in a more direct manner to diminish the force of unworthy emotions, by making that unworthiness plain to the agent. An agent committed to self-improvement desires to desire things which are worthy of desire, and the realisation that some object of attraction is not a member of that class, though it may not cancel its attraction entirely, is likely at least to reduce it.

While emotions and feelings may be made to listen to reason, their origin in a range of human drives and instincts ensures they will arise naturally in us, whatever reason has to say. Hence even people whose moral development is well advanced are never wholly beyond the reach of temptation. Unless virtue is confused with a kind of psychological truncation, the virtuous person is not one in whom the bodily appetites and other natural desires that can lead one astray have conveniently been extinguished. For instance, the virtuous person may still be subject to certain sexual desires which, since they could lead to immoral behaviour, will continue to have to be managed. If virtue is not mere insensibility, then the virtuous person still needs to govern her natural passions, even if

she has become more accomplished (firm, decisive, swift) through training and practice at doing this than the moral tyro. What she has *not* done is transcended the need for continence, which would mark her as either a god or a zombie.

On the account of virtue I am defending, the virtuous person is not one who has moved beyond the need for continence; indeed, continence will always be a component of virtue. The virtuous person is not distinct in kind but rather in degree from the (aspiring) continent agent. On this view, the description 'virtuous' is appropriately applied to someone who has achieved a high standard of moral development; what it does *not* mean is that she has passed some moral milestone beyond which continence is not required. (We could also describe people as having a 'virtuous intention' if, while they are not yet virtuous, they are strongly committed to the task of self-improvement.) However, some agents will remain 'merely continent' if, like Jim in our earlier example, they have no ambition to progress beyond the point of self-control. In contrast, those who, like Jack, practise systematic self-control with the aim of coming to love good action for its own sake and of aligning their inclinations more closely with their reason are on their way to virtue (though it would be foolish to attempt to specify a precise point at which virtue begins).

Faced with temptation, the agent who has developed good moral habits should find it easier than the moral tyro to resist it, and she can be expected to do so without wavering or hesitancy. But even an agent who can properly be described as 'virtuous' will have desires to manage, even if for her this is more like keeping her foot on a defeated but still potent enemy than an ongoing struggle with one that is yet to be vanquished. To suppose that once a good character has been formed it can never un-form again is a dangerous illusion. Inclinations and reason may have drawn together, but they can always draw apart again if the agent drops her guard. Several factors can put the process of moral advancement into reverse, including, to name some of the more obvious: the advent of novel or unusually urgent temptations; the development of bad habits through laziness or inattention; distraction from moral concerns by the onset of other interests or concerns; a loss of moral energy or will brought about by depression or anomie; and – arguably the greatest threat of all to the virtuous subject – self-complacency. To prevent these threats arising, or to deal with them if they do, calls for a form of labour different from both the

‘occasional’ and ‘developmental’ forms of labour discussed earlier; what she needs now is the ‘*sustaining labour*’ that ensures that virtue is a lasting state and not a nine-days’ wonder. This is not just a matter of maintaining upright habits and avoiding laziness and self-satisfaction, but requires the agent to pay continued attention to the reasons for choosing, and for loving, the good. Virtue involves the formation of good habits, as Aristotle says, but if it becomes mere unreflective habitual behaviour it is inevitably on the cusp of dissolution. 8

In claiming that being virtuous is compatible with continuing to feel the force of temptation (even when rejection of the reasons for action arising from that temptation has been swift and unhesitating), I am, incidentally, somewhat at odds with Stohr, who thinks it would be characteristic of the *continent* agent to feel regret and annoyance at hankering after some pleasure even after she has decided to forego it, having judged it to have no value in the circumstances. Stohr gives the example of a woman who has missed her favourite television programme in order to go to help a friend, and who feels cross with herself for feeling sorry at missing it; in contrast, the *virtuous* agent, she says, would be one who loses her appetite for watching the TV show in those circumstances, and so has nothing to reproach herself for in regard to any positive feelings in favour of watching it (2003: 362). While I agree with Stohr that the virtuous woman would not want to watch the show *in those circumstances*, it remains true that she would have liked to watch it, had the circumstances been different. So the thought that she is missing a pleasant experience can cross her mind without any detriment to her virtue. (‘It’s a pity that my friend needed my help just then. But of course, given that she did, there was no contest. All I wanted to do now was to help my friend, not watch the programme’) Like her continent counterpart, as Stohr conceives her, she can regret missing the programme, even though did not want to watch it as things stood. There is no distinguishing between virtue and continence on these lines. It is true that the less morally advanced agent may feel dissatisfied with herself that she wavered, even if momentarily, before deciding to forego the programme and help her friend. But had she been a ‘merely continent’ agent of the type of Jim, it is doubtful whether she would have had even this thought. (She might, more probably, have felt some pleasure and pride at winning the battle against temptation.) To regret that one has been tempted by something unworthy is, in fact,

strong evidence that one is well on the way towards virtue, guided by a clear idea of one's goal and keen to arrive there.

7. CONCLUSION

I have been arguing that virtue should not be thought of as a categorically different state from continence and that even virtuous people are still within the reach of temptation, and so have need for continence. To be sure, there is a condition that can be termed 'mere continence', in which the agent is content to deal with bad temptations piecemeal and lacks any longer-term goals of moral improvement. But many continent agents are more aspirational than that and aim to attain a closer alignment between their reason and passions, together with a love of good action for its own sake. Such 'aspirational continence' is different only in degree, I have suggested, from a more mature virtue, and it distorts the nature of moral progress to speak as if at some point the agent changes from being continent to virtuous, after which he has no use for continence. Several recent writers, including Stohr, Stark, Korsgaard and Baxley, have rightly emphasised that virtue has its developmental roots in continence, but while they acknowledge the vital continuity between continence and virtue, their tendency to look for contrasts between how the 'virtuous' agent and the 'continent' one would act in situations of morally significant choice talk has a fissiparous tendency which distorts the phenomenological reality. There is a certain theoretical neatness in proposing that virtuous agent, called on to make some morally significant choice, no longer gives house-room to certain thoughts and feelings which a continent agent would have to expel or face down before he can make the same choice. On this picture, the virtuous agent acts swiftly and unhesitatingly – indeed, without difficulty, since he has passed the stage at which such decisions cost him any effort; his continent counterpart, on the other hand, succeeds but only after a struggle and some mental pain. But this account is *too* neat, both in its representation of a qualitative difference between the inner dynamics of the virtuous and the continent agent, and in its depiction of the virtuous agent as having moved beyond the range of temptation.

Note that I am not arguing that virtue merely collapses into continence. To do this would be implicitly to deny that there is such a thing as moral development, a process of

character improvement in which people gradually substitute for a piecemeal and patchy control over their unruly desires, a more systematic and effective management of their passions, informed and inspired by a clear conception of the good and a firm intention to achieve it. But the mistake is to think that the continence of the moral trainee is related to the eventuating virtue as the chrysalis to the butterfly or the flower-bud to the bloom. Since to be human is to be subject to certain passions, and some of those passions remain permanently capable of inclining a person to behave badly, the virtuous agent is more plausibly ascribed the attainment (the product of labour) of a relatively reliable, quick and resolute rejection of bad temptations than a fantastical ‘psychic harmony’ in which only well-directed passions are retained, or have any motive power. Virtue, in short, is not something entirely different from continence but rather continence that has matured with practice, becoming more stable, effective and self-aware.

And even a stable virtue of this kind is capable of being undermined if particularly strong winds blow or if regular maintenance is neglected. Even in ordinary conditions it is always vulnerable to self-complacency, distraction or the drift into bad habits; if extraordinary conditions should arise, which make unprecedented demands on the subject for which one is not prepared by habit and experience, only a substantial injection of fresh continent effort may save the day. To get through life without ever needing to make such effort would call for an exceptional amount of moral luck (which is another reason why it is wrong to look on continence as an inferior state to virtue; sometimes continence must take over where ordinary virtue leaves off). But it would be another manifestation of self-complacency to believe that we would always be capable of making the requisite effort; for this we need to be lucky in ourselves as well as our circumstances. In seeking to develop our moral character, we should take care to avoid developing with it the *hubris* of virtue. Here we do well to bear in mind John Bunyan’s well-known ejaculation when seeing a man who was being led away to be hanged: ‘There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bunyan.’ *

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Notes.

1. Not every passion or action admits of a mean, however. Aristotle notes that some passions and actions are bad intrinsically and not because they are excessive or defective in relation to some choice-worthy mean. As examples he cites the passions of spite, shamelessness and envy, and the actions of adultery, theft and murder (NE1107a; 39). Tongue-in-cheek (perhaps), he remarks that it makes no sense to talk of ‘committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way’; committing adultery is simply wrong in itself and not because it is an excessive or defective form of some action type that is virtuous if performed in the right degree (ibid.). On this account, a person without adulterous inclinations cannot be praised for his virtue in that respect, since there is no relevant mean state between extremes which rational agents ought to be aiming at. While there may be some merit in caring enough about the good to be glad that one lacks specific faults, this should not be confused with merit for lacking them (unless one formerly had some fault of excess or deficiency and has deliberately worked to rid oneself of it).
2. In this account of continence I depart from David Carr’s somewhat unflattering account of the state, which ascribes to many continent people a ‘reluctance’ to follow reason ‘perhaps to the point of resenting the moral conscience that denies them the pleasures of less scrupulous others’ (Carr 2009: 43). In their case, he thinks, the commitment to following reason is only half-hearted (unlike in truly virtuous agents). But for that reason such people provide the wrong model on which to judge the merits of a whole-hearted continence. And while Carr is doubtless right that resolving conflicts between instinct and the perceived demands of proper conduct can metamorphose into what psychoanalysts term ‘repression’, with a variety of unfortunate consequences (ibid.: 44), this too seems to be a perversion rather than a version of true continence.
3. In Kantian terminology, his motives are *heteronomous*: what he does accords with the moral law but is not done for the sake of the law. As Korsgaard observes, there is a convergence between Aristotle and Kant on this issue: ‘Both think that

[an agent's] motivational state is both incomplete and unreliable until he reflects on the reasons why he should be beneficent, until his actions imply the presence of right reason' (Korsgaard 2008: 196, and *passim*).

4. This formulation of the labour theory implies that no praise at all would be due to an agent, such as God, for whom doing good is effortless. I am not sure that we should be disturbed by this implication. But there is no need to settle here the question of whether moral credit can *only* be earned by laborious effort of some kind or whether there might be other grounds on which agents could be praised, e.g. for having a naturally, or an essentially, virtuous disposition (though Aristotle denies that anyone is truly virtuous 'by nature') or for having a heartfelt love of the good (or of one's neighbour). The important claim at present is that labour is a major source of moral credit, and not that it is the exclusive source.
5. Foot departs here from Aristotle, who excluded theft from the category of vices that have correlative virtues. On Aristotle's view, there is nothing specifically virtuous about not feeling tempted to steal, any more than there is about not being tempted to commit adultery. But this difference is of no great moment here, since it is the general formula for distinguishing virtue and continence to which Foot takes her example to point that is chiefly at issue.
6. Jeffrey Seidman makes a slightly different distinction between 'motivational silencing' (the agent disallows the evil temptations from having any role in her practical reasoning) and 'rational silencing' (in Seidman 2005: 68-9). The latter corresponds to Baxley's 'objective' silencing, while 'motivational silencing' might be thought of as one stage further on from what Baxley refers to as 'normative silencing', where the agent, having reflected that she *ought not* to heed the reasons supplied by the temptations, expels them from her motivational set. However, it is not only obscure from a psychological point of view just how this expulsion is supposed to be accomplished, but this account of what the virtuous person does is once again hard to square with McDowell's concession that virtuous persons can still feel the *attraction* of certain courses though they judge them out of order.

7. Baxley similarly recognises what she calls the ‘exceptionally august standard of virtue’ that McDowell sets, commenting that it is only ‘partially and imperfectly’ realisable by ‘mere mortals’ (Baxley 2007: 408). In fact, McDowellite virtue seems most closely akin to what Aristotle terms not ‘virtue’ but ‘superhuman virtue’ (‘a heroic and divine kind of virtue’ and the state which is the polar opposite of brutishness), commenting that ‘it is rarely that a godlike man is found’ (1145a; p.159). Cf. too Blackburn 1998: 37.
8. Might the ‘merely continent’ agent further differ from the ‘virtuous’ one by having certain bad desires that the virtuous will not have? This seems unpromising, raising again the worry that virtue is a form of insensibility. Carr suggests that while a virtuous person may feel ‘sexual attraction to unlawful partners’, only a continent agent will feel ‘lust or adulterous feelings’ towards them (2009: 43). I confess to being unsure what lust is if it is not the same as a feeling of sexual attraction. But if ‘adulterous feelings’ are anything more than sexual attraction to unlawful partners, they would seem to involve *either* a specific intention to commit adultery *or* indifference to the fact that the sources of sexual attraction are unlawful partners. However, neither of these additional elements will be any more characteristic of the continent agent than the virtuous.

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